GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE CHILD INTERVENTION SYSTEM REVIEW

October 2010

Closing the Gap Between Vision and Reality: Strengthening Accountability, Adaptability and Continuous Improvement in Alberta's Child Intervention System

Government of Alberta

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Children and Youth Services, October 2010.

[Introduction]

In July 2009, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services announced an external review of Alberta's child intervention system to find strengths in the current system, identify leading practices from other jurisdictions and suggest ways the system may be enhanced to better support at-risk children, youth and families.

The review was conducted by a panel that included specialists in the fields of child intervention, health, mental health, justice and services to Aboriginal people. The panel's report, *Closing the Gap Between Vision and Reality: Strengthening Accountability, Adaptability and Continuous Improvement in Alberta's Child Intervention System* confirmed that.

In Alberta, the nature of child intervention supports and services has continued to evolve over the years. The rate and effects of population growth and shifting demographics in the province – combined with societal issues such as poverty, gang activity, addictions, and family violence – make it necessary to confirm that Alberta's child intervention system is keeping pace and responding effectively to the needs of the province's children and families.

> The report from the panel confirms Alberta's stakeholders believe the vision to provide proactive services that strengthen families and communities is the right one. – CIS Review Panel 2010

The delivery of child intervention services is complex and challenging. There have been numerous changes to legislation, systems, policies and procedures in the past several years that have moved the child intervention system toward achieving better outcomes. As the panel points out, "The stakeholders that we heard from believe that the vision for the child intervention service in this province is the right one: proactive services that strengthen families and communities, and prevent crises in the lives of children." Furthermore, the panel goes on to say that their objective was "not to remake the child intervention service in Alberta. Indeed, quite the opposite is true – building from the current base and providing stability for the dedicated people providing services is very important."

Improvements need to be made to enhance the Ministry's capacity to implement change and follow through on the vision of providing proactive services that strengthen families and communities. This response charts a clear path that will, as the panel's report title suggests, "close the gap between vision and reality."

The recommendations were evaluated using four criteria:

- Will implementation result in improved service delivery and make a meaningful difference to children and youth?
- Will implementation result in planned and incremental improvements that support staff to remain focused on the top priority of achieving safety and well-being for children and youth?
- Will implementation result in the effective allocation of resources that will directly impact outcomes for children and youth?
- Will implementation strengthen community and stakeholder confidence in the system?

Area of Focus	Recommendation	Response
Services for Aboriginal Albertans	1. Establish a senior executive position at the Assistant Deputy Minister level tasked with enhancing the capacity and cultural competency of the child intervention system to serve Aboriginal children and families.	Accept
	2. Establish an ongoing, formal, tripartite process to collaboratively address inequity for First Nations people in the child intervention system.	Accept
	3. Enhance capacity for Aboriginal-led agencies to provide services for Aboriginal people in off-reserve communities. As capacity is built over time, enable Aboriginal-led agencies to provide a greater range of child intervention services to Aboriginal children and families off-reserve.	Accept
	4. Establish an off-reserve Aboriginal service delivery stream to provide child protection, investigations and case management for Aboriginal children and families.	Do not Accept
Quality assurance	5. All child intervention services delivered to children and families by government or on behalf of government should be accredited.	Accept
	6. Continue to develop and implement a clear, efficient process for escalating and tracking serious incidents within the Ministry, DFNAs, and contracted agencies.	Accept
	7. Clarify the role of the Child and Youth Advocate to focus on individual advocacy and not system-level advice.	Do not Accept
	8. Establish a provincial Child and Family Service Quality Council with a mandate to systematically assess service quality and report findings publicly.	Accept
Capacity to implement change	9. Develop and resource a change strategy that aligns and guides implementation of the various child intervention improvement initiatives.	Accept
	10. Develop and implement a human resource strategy that addresses capacity, qualification and competencies at all levels of the system.	Accept
	11. Continue the shift toward an outcomes-based performance management system.	Accept
	12. Seek a mandate to establish a shared approach and infrastructure to better support vulnerable children and families in Alberta.	Accept
Governance	13. Establish a clear line of accountability for local child intervention service under Regional Directors who report to the Provincial Director.	Do not Accept
	14. Transition CFSA Boards to become Child and Family Services Advisory Councils focused on providing input to the Ministry on behalf of communities.	Do not Accept

[Services for Aboriginal Albertans]

CULTURALLY-APPROPRIATE AND INCLUSIVE

OVERVIEW

The panel addressed the many complex issues facing Aboriginal children, youth and their families throughout the report. Although Aboriginal children and youth comprise nine per cent of the Alberta child population, they make up 64 per cent of all children in care. The findings of the panel illustrate issues that go beyond the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the system.

> Change is needed to support Aboriginal people in having a stronger voice in developing and implementing Aboriginal child intervention services.

The panel points out that Aboriginal child welfare is a complex issue that is linked to broader historical, social and economic issues. As such, the Ministry must work in active partnership with stakeholders (including Aboriginal leaders; organizations and communities; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; and other Government of Alberta ministries) to strengthen relationships, improve collaboration and support capacity building to address the root causes of Aboriginal children coming into care.

The panel recommends changes that will give Aboriginal people more responsibility and authority over child intervention services for Aboriginal children and families, in order for these services to be more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal Albertans.

The Ministry supports the underlying principle of the panel's recommendations in this area – change is needed to support Aboriginal people in having a stronger voice in developing and implementing Aboriginal child intervention services. We must find new and better ways to support and work with Aboriginal children, families and communities; and to build trusting, positive relationships that will help improve outcomes.

Recommendation 1

Establish a senior executive position at the Assistant Deputy Minister level tasked with enhancing the capacity and cultural competency of the child intervention system to serve Aboriginal children and families.

What This Means

The goal of this recommendation is to ensure there is a dedicated and committed focus on improving the capacity of the system to respond to the needs of Aboriginal children and families. The panel notes that this level of executive oversight would assist in following through on other recommendations related to improving service delivery to Aboriginal Albertans.

Recommendation 3

Enhance capacity for Aboriginal-led agencies to provide services for Aboriginal people in off-reserve communities. As capacity is built over time, enable Aboriginal-led agencies to provide a greater range of child intervention services to Aboriginal children and families off-reserve.

What This Means

Many of the services and supports offered to children and families involved in the child intervention system are delivered through contracted service agencies in communities. The panel recommends developing Aboriginal-led service agencies as an approach to supporting culturally appropriate and effective service delivery.

The panel acknowledges that this recommendation cannot be realized immediately and that enhancing capacity of the system and Aboriginal service providers should be considered as an incremental strategy over time.

Government Response - ACCEPT

Children and Youth Services recognizes that off-reserve service delivery must be a priority, as the majority of Aboriginal children in care are living and receiving services off-reserve.

The Ministry acknowledges the need to increase the involvement of Aboriginal organizations and communities in determining service delivery approaches. A collaborative approach begins with a sound and transparent process for engaging Aboriginal service agencies and off-reserve Aboriginal communities.

Next Steps

With a focus on Calgary and Edmonton, Children and Youth Services will work with urban Aboriginal stakeholders and service partners to develop pilot programs aimed at improving child intervention services delivered off-reserve. This work will include reviewing service delivery approaches in other jurisdictions that have been successful in responding to the needs of Aboriginal clients in an urban setting.

Children and Youth Services will also continue to support the Métis Settlements CFSA and its partnership with the Métis Nation of Alberta to examine how to expand services to Métis children and families who are not affiliated with a specific settlement and/or who do not live on a settlement.

Recommendation 4

Establish an off-reserve Aboriginal service delivery stream to provide child protection, investigations and case management for Aboriginal children and families.

What This Means

The panel suggests that Children and Youth Services work toward the establishment of a separate Aboriginal service delivery system. This recommendation suggests that a dedicated service delivery structure is the best way to accomplish better outcomes for Aboriginal children. The panel identifies that this recommendation is closely linked to Recommendation 3. The panel acknowledges a move in this direction would need to be carefully planned and executed incrementally over time.

[Quality Assurance]

IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES

OVERVIEW

The panel highlights the need for solid quality assurance processes to "generate information that helps ensure and demonstrate accountability, provide flexibility for professionals to adapt their practices to specific circumstances, and elicit lessons learned that support continuous improvement." The panel notes that Children and Youth Services "has made significant investments in quality assurance mechanisms, but a more unified, purposeful approach to optimizing and aligning these efforts is required to move forward." Specifically they suggest developing other components critical to a solid quality assurance process, including:

- more specific external oversight for the purpose of public accountability
- child and family input into service evaluation and improvement
- systematic case reviews, and
- a process for identifying and tracking emerging trends.

> The Ministry "has made significant investments in quality assurance mechanisms, but a more unified, purposeful approach ... is required to move forward." – CIS Review Panel 2010

Recommendation 5

All child intervention services delivered to children and families by government or on behalf of government should be accredited.

What This Means

Currently, service delivery agencies contracted to provide child intervention services are required to be accredited by an external accrediting body approved by Children and Youth Services. Accreditation is intended to enhance quality assurance by creating a regular cycle of review of service delivery that includes a focus on client experience, effective processes and client outcomes.

The panel recommends expanding this expectation to CFSAs and DFNAs. This recommendation is to ensure common standards for service delivery are in place across the system and that a mechanism is in place for external assessment of performance related to those standards.

Government Response - ACCEPT

Children and Youth Services accepts the need for a standardized process to maintain service quality. Accreditation that provides an independent assessment of CFSAs and DFNAs based on leading practice is one identified mechanism to meet that need, however there may be other processes or models that could be considered.

The Review of Child and Youth Advocacy in Alberta (2009) supported the systemic advocacy function of the Child and Youth Advocate and recommended this role be strengthened.

Next Steps
Continue to work closely with the Child and Youth Advocate on individual advocacy and providing feedback on systemic issues.

The focus will be on implementing Recommendation 8 and considering the input from the Child and Youth Advocate in developing and implementing our response.

Recommendation 8

Establish a provincial Child and Family Service Quality Council with a mandate to systematically assess service quality and report findings publicly.

What This Means
The panel notes that Children and Youth Services currently does not have adequate external oversight and public reporting on service delivery, which has led to a lack of transparency. The panel indicates that, in addition to strengthening accountability, external oversight can "promote greater public confidence and a better public understanding of child intervention."

Government Response - ACCEPT
Children and Youth Services accepts the panel's recommendation to establish an external review panel that will regularly and systemically review service quality and report findings publicly. An external panel will assist in the ongoing assessment of service delivery and ensure an appropriate level of transparency that will help Albertans to be confident the Ministry is making progress toward improving outcomes for children and families.

Next Steps
Details on the mandate, scope, supporting structure and legislative implications of such an entity will be developed in consultation with stakeholders. In addition to structure and scope, this function needs to be explicitly connected to other quality assurance processes within the Ministry and inform an integrated quality assurance framework.

[Capacity to Implement Change]

CHANGE MANAGEMENT THAT IS EFFECTIVE

OVERVIEW

For change to succeed, three key components are needed: good ideas, the will to change and strong execution of plans. The panel observes that, in Alberta, "ideas for how to improve child intervention services are clearly present, and decision makers have demonstrated the will to make big changes in line with a vision to transform the system in the best interests of children. However, capacity to implement intended changes has been a key issue over the past several years."

While the panel's report affirms that Alberta has the right vision for improved services to children and families, this vision has not been fully realized. The panel encourages the Ministry to take a staged, planned and purposeful approach to implementing future changes to the system.

> "...Decision makers have demonstrated the will to make big changes with a vision to transform the system in the best interests of children." – CIS Review Panel 2010

Although the panel references 'change fatigue' in an evolving system, the desired end state is not an organization that never experiences change; but an organization that evolves in a planned versus reactive manner where the need for changes and improvements are well understood and embraced by those impacted.

Recommendation 9

Develop and resource a change strategy that aligns and guides implementation of the various child intervention improvement initiatives.

What This Means

The panel recommends that dedicated attention and resources be committed to change management concepts and methodology to support organizational shifts and improvement initiatives. The panel notes that, over the past 10 years, Ministry staff have faced numerous alterations to legislation, systems, policies and procedures. While these changes have been made in an attempt to move the child intervention system toward better outcomes for children and families, the process for implementing change has not always been fully executed.

The panel states that there is a "need for a disciplined approach and supporting infrastructure" and elaborates that "given the scale of changes that have occurred and those that will be required in the future, this approach to change should be iterative and flexible to adapt to a continually shifting environment."

Recommendation 11

Continue the shift toward an outcomes-based performance management system.

What This Means

The panel recommends the Ministry continue to work toward a model that evaluates services based on the achievement of positive child and family outcomes, such as working with families to enhance their skills and capacities so they can keep their children at home; maintaining cultural connections for Aboriginal children; and finding permanent homes for children in care who cannot be reunited with their families.

Government Response - ACCEPT

Children and Youth Services is currently implementing an initiative that uses an Outcomes-Based Service Delivery model to fund, assess and report on the performance of agency and Ministry service delivery. The Ministry believes that improving outcomes for children and families should always be the main priority. Moving toward an outcomes-based performance system will also help ensure the right information is available to guide improvements to the system.

Children and Youth Services is working collaboratively toward streamlining the types of measurement and reporting that happens in both the Ministry and service delivery agencies so that clear and consistent information is more readily available about outcomes for children and families served by the Ministry.

Next Steps

The Outcomes-Based Service Delivery model is currently being piloted across the province. This new model of delivery will be used for public reporting and accountability, program and policy evaluation, and to learn about areas of leading practice and areas for improvement. In the future, contracts with service delivery agencies will also be built upon achievement of agreed upon outcomes.

Recommendation 12

Seek a mandate to establish a shared approach and infrastructure to better support vulnerable children and families in Alberta.

What This Means

Children and families who are involved with child intervention have issues that are multifaceted and often require solutions that involve a number of government and community based services. These services should not be developed in isolation; rather, they must be integrated to create seamless services and supports to children and families. The panel recommends a formal mandate from the Premier to "establish a unifying initiative across the Government of Alberta that will better integrate mandates, policy, resources and infrastructure that support children and families".

Government Response – ACCEPT

Issues related to child intervention need to be viewed in a broader societal context. Children and Youth Services will strengthen working relationships with other ministries and service providers to help achieve the best possible outcomes for children and families. This type of client-centred, outcomes-based collaboration is consistent with the current direction in the Premier's mandate letters to all ministries.

[Governance]

CLARIFYING OUR GOVERNANANCE STRUCTURES

OVERVIEW

The panel's governance recommendations suggest the need to establish clearer lines of reporting and responsibility for child intervention, while elevating the input and advice of the community about how best to deliver services. While the panel's recommendations support a centralized model of delivery for Alberta, the panel concedes that a decentralized model or regional service delivery model would also work. Opinions vary about the advantages and disadvantages of the two service delivery models. The critical consideration for the Ministry in its governance approach is whether the chosen model best supports positive outcomes for children, youth and families.

> **"The best interests of children in the system cannot be determined or acted upon without the involvement of the communities in which they live and other stakeholders who deliver services."** - CIS Review Panel 2010

The role of CFSAs and DFNAs is to leverage the unique relationships that exist from one area of the province to the next. Regionalization supports service delivery that can be more inclusive and innovative, built upon community engagement and involvement. The panel noted "The best interests of children in the system cannot be determined or acted upon without the involvement of the communities in which they live and other stakeholders who deliver services." When there is clarity and understanding related to roles and accountabilities, a regional service delivery system that is closer to the system users can be more adaptable, flexible and able to respond to the specific and evolving needs of communities. In this model of service delivery, the role of the Ministry becomes one of establishing and maintaining quality assurance, legislation and policy oversight and supporting practice.

Recommendation 13

Establish a clear line of accountability for local child intervention service under Regional Directors who report to the Provincial Director.

What This Means

The panel recommends that the current position of CFSA Chief Executive Officer be redefined as Regional Directors responsible to the Provincial Director – a function responsible for the administration of the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act and child intervention practice in general. The panel indicates this model would result in better clarity of decision making and accountability; however also conceded they did not seek a legal opinion as it relates to the legislative implications of this recommendation.